



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA  
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Advent 4: Year B – December 20, 2020

Sermon Title: “The Back of the Baseball Card”  
Sermon Text: Luke 1:26-38

I’ve been a baseball fan since I was a little boy. I loved playing the game and watching the pros on TV, but many of my fondest memories came from collecting baseball cards. Back in the 70’s I *bought* packs of cards, I *traded* them, and I even put them in my bike spokes to get that great clicking sound. But most of all, I loved looking at the photos of those 70’s-era baseball stars. The uniforms were neon bright. The players were pretty flamboyant too, with long flowing mustaches, bushy beards, lamb chop sideburns and crazy, puffy hairstyles. It was quite a decade.

But at some point, we eventually turn our attention to **the back of the baseball card**. That’s where the player’s statistics are recorded. Height, weight, age, games played, homeruns, batting average, walks, strikeouts and more. As I grew older, I came to realize that baseball is more of a business than a game, and it’s **the back of the baseball card** that ultimately determines a player’s worth.

In our Gospel text today, the angel Gabriel addresses Mary as “favored one” and makes remarkable promises about the son she is to conceive and bear. But why Mary? What’s so special about her? Or to put it another way, what was on **the back of her baseball card** that qualified her for this great blessing?

Was it because of her ancestry or heritage? The Bible provides some information about *Joseph’s* lineage but few details about Mary. She might have been a descendent of royalty or as common as sand in the desert. We don’t know for sure, and so we can’t conclude that God selected Mary because of her bloodlines.

Well, maybe she came from a powerful and wealthy family. After all, nothing is too good for the Son of God, right? Well, again, there’s nothing in our text to hint that Mary has this kind of background, and the balance of her life, as recorded in Holy Scripture reveals nothing to suggest that she comes from power or wealth. So that can’t be the reason.

Well, maybe Mary is special because she’s *available*. She has time. She is “unencumbered.” We know right away that *that’s* not the reason. Luke’s Gospel says quite explicitly that she was engaged to Joseph. She wasn’t a free agent. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, being engaged was a much bigger deal than it is today. Based on the customs of the day, the marriage of Mary and Joseph would have been arranged by Joseph and Mary’s father by means of a contract. Clearly Mary is NOT available. Breaking this engagement is a breach of contract. Breaking this engagement is a breach of honor and something that could bring great shame to all parties. Availability is not the reason why God selected Mary.

Maybe God picked Mary because of her exemplary righteousness. That seems like a reasonable qualification to be Jesus's mother. But consider her discussion with Gabriel. Her initial reaction was to be perplexed and to ponder what this all meant. Is that the reaction of a person of extreme righteousness? Maybe, but it sounds pretty normal and ordinary to me. Mary doesn't seem to have everything all figured out from the beginning. And later on, after Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear Jesus, does she jump for joy? Not exactly. In fact, she challenges Gabriel as to how in this world this could even be possible. Does that sound like someone who is the most righteous person in the world?

*In fact, Mary sounds a lot like you and me.* Has God called any of us because of *our* ancestral lineage? Has God picked any of us because of *our* family power, prestige and money? Has God put *us* to work because we have absolutely nothing else to do and no other commitments? Has God called any of *us* because of our total and complete righteousness?

You see, that's the problem with both *baseball* and *life in general*. We judge everyone by **the back of the baseball card**. We measure and assess folks based upon their talents, wealth, education, earning capacity, and appearance. We reduce people to a dollar sign, like something on a store shelf. In doing so, we dehumanize our neighbor and ourselves.

That's why Mary's story, and God's selection of Mary, is such an *important* story. There's nothing on the back of Mary's baseball card to suggest that she is specially qualified for the task God assigned to her. We see this most clearly in Gabriel's statement to Mary that she is a "favored one" and has "found favor with God." What Gabriel is conveying by that phrase is that *God has given Mary grace. God has filled her with grace.* It's not Mary's doing. Only God's *grace* – God's *unmerited gift* – God's *great undeserved blessing* –has qualified Mary for all that God has selected her to accomplish.

What's remarkable is that God's grace qualifies *us* too! The grace that enabled Mary to bear the Lord Jesus, in spite of her absolute ordinariness, is the same grace that God showers upon us so that *we* can do the things that God calls us to do. Just like Mary, we aren't, on our own, worthy to undertake this work... and we aren't specially qualified either.

But *despite* our doubts, our worries, our sinfulness, our insecurities, and sometimes even our lack of faith, the angel Gabriel reassures *us*, just as he reassured Mary, that all will be well... "for nothing is impossible with God." God isn't limited by the back of *anyone's* baseball card.

So don't let the world tell you you're *too old* to matter or *too young* to make a difference. Don't let the world tell you that you're not smart enough, not educated enough, or not connected enough to be relevant. Don't let the world devalue you on the basis of your bank account, your résumé, your peer-reviewed publications, your profession, your gender, your orientation, your possessions, or your address.

You are a beloved child of God, and you may be feeling God stirring your heart right *now* as God calls you to take your place and role in the kingdom. Are you worried you don't qualify for God's blessings? Are you concerned you aren't righteous enough for God? Do you doubt whether you have what it takes to accomplish what God's calling you to do?

If so, you're a lot more like Mary than you might have believed possible. As Mary stood there in the presence of Gabriel, she undoubtedly understood that all of this was going to completely disrupt the life she had known. But despite that, God's grace – *not* the back of her baseball card - empowered Mary to look Gabriel in the eye and say: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

That same grace enables *us* and qualifies *us* to follow God's *call*, and to undertake God's *work* despite our own limitations... because the promise Gabriel spoke to Mary that day in Nazareth is the same promise that the Holy Spirit speaks to us *this* day: "nothing is impossible with God."

Armed with that promise and equipped with God's grace, we can confidently step forward *wherever* and *however* God is calling us. And unconfined by the back of *our* baseball card and unlimited by the world's statistics, doubts, sneers, and fears, God has empowered all of us to boldly proclaim, *just as Mary did*: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Thanks be to God. Amen.